

Fatima

and

Saret

by Maureen McCarthy



Fatima, her two sisters and her parents, Semra and Atila, are Turkish immigrants who live in a block of flats in Melbourne, Australia. Saret is a Cambodian boy who lives in the same block. His family have immigrated illegally into Australia from the Cambodian terror regime. (CO-1,6)

- *Talk about love between youngsters who come from two different cultures. Do you think it can cause any problems?*
- *Do you know any young people who come from cultures that are different to yours? Talk about how your lives differ (parents, education, work, marriage, etc.).*

☞ Fatima opened the front door of her home and things were exactly as she expected them to be. Her mother Semra and her two younger sisters Melec, nine, and Nilgun, twelve, were sitting at the laminex kitchen table doing piecework and gossiping. A breeze blew through the open window making the bright pink nylon curtains puff out like balloons. That was one good thing about living so high. The flat often caught a breeze that could not be felt at ground level. It made the summer easier to put up with. They greeted her without stopping their work. Fatima got herself a drink from the fridge and sat down immediately to help them.

Semra's job was making purses for a Greek businessman who owned stalls at various markets around the city. The stalls specialized in Australian souvenirs for overseas visitors. Japanese tourists particularly loved the little koala bears and kangaroos. He also sold ashtrays and tea towels with maps of Australia on them for those with less money to spend. Semra would cut out the shape of Australia in fake kangaroo fur with a small sharp knife. Her two younger daughters stuck these onto plastic purse covers with glue. Fatima's job was to fill each purse with tissue paper and sew in the zip.

The new baby slept alongside the table

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"Thou shalt love thy neighbour"

Matthew, the Bible

in her pram. They all worked very fast talking about this and that. Semra was describing the recent funeral of a fellow worker.

"My old boss was there at the funeral with his wife. You should have seen her hat. And the shoes."

Semra sighed with longing.

"Red, with little black bows on the side."

Fatima felt irritated by her mother's naive pleasure in describing the woman's fancy clothes.

"So? She could afford it."

Her two younger sisters, who were enjoying the story, sprang to their mother's defence.

"Fatima! You always have to see the worst, don't you?"

"Everyone has to do things wrong, don't they?"

Fatima, quick to stick up for herself, continued the bickering.

"All I'm saying is that if I get run over by a car outside my work, no way would I want the boss and his swampy wife at the funeral."

"You're just jealous!" Nilgun flashed.

"Oh yeah - jealous?"

Fatima gave Nilgun an angry look.

Semra began to laugh. Her shoulders shook and all of a sudden she seemed younger. The girls stopped their fighting, enjoying their mother in good spirits. Semra stood up and started walking around the room, copying the walk of the boss's wife.

"They were too tight and too high," she giggled. "We all thought she was going to fall over."

The three girls laughed at their mother's clowning. None of them heard the door slam or knew their father, Atila, was home until he was inside the kitchen. He looked around sternly and the joking and laughing stopped abruptly. They all went back to their piecework, except Semra who immediately on seeing her husband, went to the living room and cleared a seat for him in front of the television.

Fatima could tell that her father was tired and in bad spirits, but didn't dare ask what was wrong. She guessed that something was going on at the factory, but her father rarely talked about what happened there.

"Pack up soon, my sister is going to call," Atila said irritably, as he went into the living room and switched on the television. Behind him, his three daughters groaned and made quiet faces between each other. Their father's sister was not their most favourite person.

Semra got Atila his coffee and slippers and then sat down to continue working with her daughters.

The noise of canned laughter filled the flat. Atila was watching an American comedy on TV and it seemed to calm him down, though his face remained blank and he wasn't laughing. Fatima could never work out how much her father understood from TV. Some of the jokes seemed risky or dirty, so she guessed he really didn't understand much. He would never admit it though. Never in a hundred years. It killed him having to get his daughters to translate, and he only ever asked when it was absolutely necessary.

TV worked like a spell for both her parents. They would come in, sit down, switch it on, and then you could see them relax. No matter what the show, it washed over them like a warm bath. Fatima often watched, fascinated, as some of the lines around her mother's mouth disappeared. She thought maybe it was so relaxing because they didn't understand.

The baby began to wake. Nilgun tried putting her dummy in and rolling her over but nothing worked. The child was definitely awake and cranky. Semra shrugged her shoulders crossly and went on with her work. She couldn't stop now. The Greek was coming tonight to pick up the week's work.

Fatima was concerned.

"She hungry?"

"No, she was fed only an hour ago," Semra said.

The baby's cries became louder. Fatima began to rock the pram.

"Stop that noise."

Atila's voice came gruffly from the next room.

Fatima's temper rose. She amused her sisters by making a face behind his back. Semra pretended not to see. Fatima picked the baby up and it stopped crying.

"See you just wanted some attention, didn't you?"

She addressed her mother in a slightly accusing tone.

"She been out today?"

Semra shook her head and went on working. Now there was the extra strain of having to put up with Atila's sister, Saadet. When was she going to get this work finished?

"I want to take her out, Mum."

"OK. Ask your father."

Fatima called out determinedly to her father.

"I want to take the baby out."

Atila didn't turn away from the television.

"OK. Take your sisters with you."

Semra protested.

"No! They must help me here ..."
she said, angrily.

Fatima pleaded a little with her father.

"I won't be long."

Atila looked at his watch and then sternly at Fatima. His voice was harsh.

"You be back in fifteen minutes. You hear?"

Fatima nodded sullenly and put the baby back down in the pram and headed for the door. Her two younger sisters were quick to see that Fatima had organized something pleasant for herself.

"All right for you!"

Fatima smiled to herself as she pushed the baby along in the pram. It was great to be out of the flat, away from the boring work and her father's temper. When he was in a bad mood he would often pester his daughters for no reason - just because they were there. Besides, the street at this time was always interesting.

Fatima loved watching people, loved to see them coming home hot and tired, in cars and from the tram, with that look of relief on their faces - another work day over. She was proud to be with the baby. Most people seemed to take an interest in babies. It was a contact point, an excuse for people

to talk to each other. A few of the women who worked at the hosiery factory down the road stopped her for a while, peeping into the pram and commenting on the baby's skin, colouring and size.

When Fatima turned the corner, planning to walk down past the gardens, she almost bumped straight into Saret. Fatima's smile was direct. She was pleased to see him but after the first hello she hesitated a little before stopping to chat. She was anxious that some of the strict Turks who lived in the area might see her and then report to her father that she had

been talking to an 'Asian man' on the street. No-one that she knew seemed to be about, so she stopped. Saret leant forward and held the baby's hand for a moment.

"Your new sister? Beautiful."

For some crazy reason Fatima felt flattered that he'd remembered. For the first time in her life she felt tongue-tied. She tried to think of something to say.

"Going to work?"

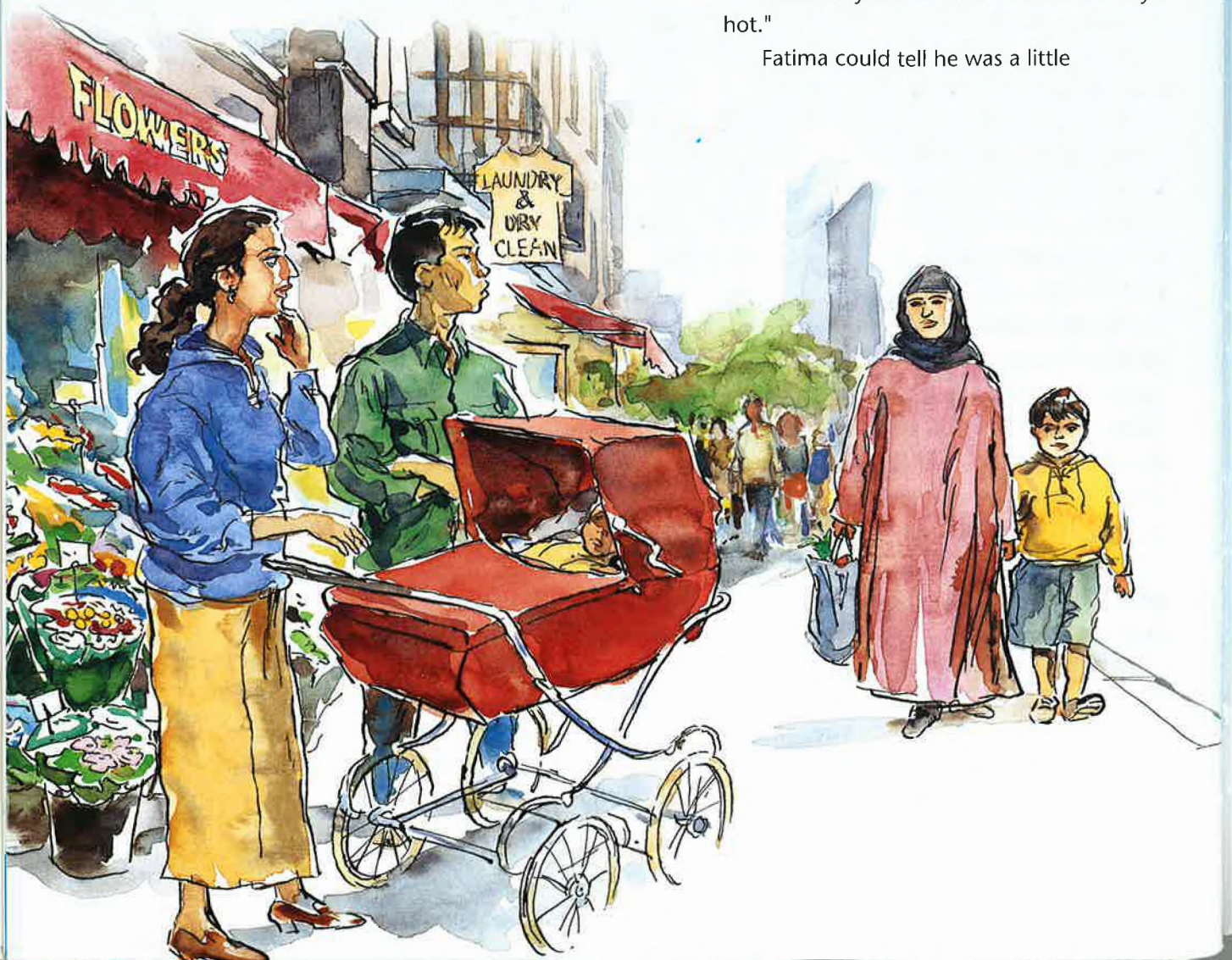
"Yes. I work a late shift."

"Where?"

Saret smiled almost apologetically with his reply.

"A laundry. Sheets and clothes. It's very hot."

Fatima could tell he was a little



self-conscious as he wiped his brow in an exaggerated way.

"Very hot. We have a bad boss before, but now he's gone and it's OK."

Fatima was curious.

"What did he do?"

Saret continued to smile, but was embarrassed that he had begun such a negative story.

"He always find something wrong. I think he not like Cambodians. I don't know."

Fatima nodded, not quite knowing what to say next.

She remembered his sister Kanya.

"How's your sister?"

"Very good. She has a new job in a French restaurant. She like it very much."

There was another silence. Fatima took a deep breath. Somehow it was exciting just standing on the street talking to this guy.

"I would like to make your sister a little kite for good luck," Saret said.

Fatima was nodding, very pleased, when she caught sight of her aunt and young cousin walking along opposite them. Fatima's Aunt Saadet was dressed in traditional Muslim dress, a full head scarf with a long-sleeved ankle-length dress. She carried a paper plate filled with home-made cakes.

Fatima's heart sank. Of all the people to see her out on the street talking to a guy! Saadet and the boy had stopped and were watching Fatima and Saret. Fatima gave them a sullen wave which they returned before heading off towards the flats.

Fatima's face tightened.

"I must go," she mumbled.

Not having witnessed the aunt's look of

disapproval, Saret was puzzled.

"Excuse me."

Saret was a little hurt.

Fatima was thinking about what would be in store for her back at the flat. She turned to him with a smile, not wanting to explain.

"I'll see you at the next meeting."

Saret nodded and they began to move away. Saret lifted his hand in a cheerful wave.

"As soon as I make this kite, I'll bring it straight to you."

"Don't you forget!"

Fatima laughed as she hurried back towards the flats, pushing the pram. A heavy feeling came over her when she reached the lifts. Whenever her aunt came there was always trouble.

All the piecework had been packed away from the kitchen by the time Fatima arrived home. Her aunt was already seated in the most comfortable chair by the window, sipping coffee from her mother's gold-rimmed cups. As Fatima went to greet her aunt with the traditional kiss, she noticed the home-made cakes in a bowl on the lace tablecloth on the coffee table. It humiliated her mother to have none of her own to offer her sister-in-law. There just hadn't been time. Fatima hurried to the kitchen to warm the baby's bottle, hoping her aunt would not start talking about that she had seen Fatima in the street a few minutes before. Fatima's heart sank as she lifted the bottle from the steaming jug of boiled water. She was aware of her father's presence behind her.

"So you want to marry the Asian boy, now?"

Atila spoke in heated whisper. The stupidity of the question made Fatima forget her fear for a moment.

"I know him."

Atila looked at her, full of suspicion.

"How do you know him, heh?"

Fatima raised her eyes to heaven making her father even more angry.

"Look he's not even a friend. He translates for the newspaper."

Atila threw up his hands in mock despair.

"Oh, the newspaper. Where does he live?"

"I don't know."

Fatima's voice was rising. Her father came towards her as if he were about to slap her across the face.

"You talk Turkish. Do you hear me? How come you think you can stand with any boy out on the street so every one can see you like some common slut?"

Fatima's face coloured at the word slut. She looked down to the feeding baby, humiliated, as Atila went back into the living-room to his wife and sister and their conversation continued in Turkish.

How could she explain to them the way things were here? How different everything was to back in Turkey? Sometimes it seemed as though they were living in different worlds. At least this time he hadn't gone completely off the deep end. She felt herself relax a little as she tickled the baby. If his sister stayed a bit longer and they gossiped some more he'd probably forget about it. She realized then that the adults in the other room were talking about her. Fatima

listened, hardly believing that her aunt was bringing up the same old topic again.

"It's easy work. Nothing heavy just ..."

Saadet smiled and enacted stuffing into boxes with her hands.

"It will be good for her. Get silly ideas out of her head. Good money, too. But the main thing ... she'll be looked after by good women."

Atila nodded his head thoughtfully.

"You might be right."

Still feeding the baby, Fatima pulled her chair awkwardly into the living room where the others were sitting. If they were going to decide her future, then at least she'd be there and try to have a say. Her mother looked so unhappy. Atila and his sister exchanged a look. It irritated Fatima to see them act as though there was something wrong with her mother.

Fatima loved her mother fiercely. Semra had such a hard life but she had an open mind. She knew things were different here and she badly wanted her girls to have another kind of life to her own. Some parents wanted things to be hard for their kids, like it had been for them. But Fatima knew her mother had no illusions about early marriages and factory work.

"All your fancy ideas. They might not work out for the best." Atila was wanting to get his wife's support, but she refused to look at him.

Saadet's tone was sugary.

"This way she can save for her trip back home and then meet Ali's boy."

"No!" Semra burst out passionately. "She should not be made to marry him!"

Saadet laughed and waved Semra down.

"No! You are a hot head."

Semra half-smiled, feeling foolish. Her sister-in-law continued to speak to her as though she were a child.

"Don't get upset. If she doesn't like the boy, she doesn't have to take him, but if you keep her at school she'll never get a chance to even meet him."

Saadet pulled a crumpled letter from her pocket and went on speaking.

"I have Ali's letter here. He's very keen for his son and Fatima to meet."

Anger rose in Fatima until it almost choked her. She stood up with the baby and burst out angrily in Turkish at her aunt.

"You mean he wants his son to come and live in Australia and then he'll come as soon as his son is an Australian citizen and I ..."

Taken aback by his daughter's fury, Atila told her to stop.

"Be quiet! It is for us to decide these important things."

Fatima shut up, but her anger put a hush over the conversation. Atila told her gruffly to take her aunt's coffee cup and fill it up. When Fatima came back to her aunt with the coffee, Saadet looked up at her with a sly smile.

"What good does school do you, heh? Does it teach you to cook? To clean? To manage your husband's house? Do they teach you how to be a good wife? How to have babies, eh? You're sixteen now. It's time you learnt these things."

Fatima did not answer nor even look at her aunt. She walked out of the room and into her bedroom.

She could hear the conversation

continuing. Saadet talked to Atila about their younger brother.

"We see what our poor brother Sami has for a wife. That's what too much school does."

Fatima heard her mother's feeble protest just before she slammed the bedroom door.

"But Fatima is very good. She helps me a lot ..."

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• *Discuss these points. Are they typical or relevant for your life. What do you think about them?*

- Semra got Atila his coffee and slippers.
- TV worked like a spell for her parents.
- It was a problem for Fatima to be seen in the street with a boy.
- Atila said Fatima was a slut because she spoke to a boy.
- The aunt (and the father?) didn't think it was necessary for Fatima to go to school.
- The aunt (and the father?) wanted to decide who Fatima should marry.

• *In pairs or groups, choose a scene from the story. Write a radio play (with sound effects). Record the play. You can choose from these scenes:*

- *Fatima, her mother and sisters.*
- *Fatima and Saret.*
- *Fatima, her father, mother and aunt.*

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